DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 305 325 SO 020 057

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TITLE Teaching about Inner Asia. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-SO-89-3
PUB DATE Apr 89
CONTRACT RI88062009
NOTE 4p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47408.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Asian Studies; *Curriculum Development; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Instruction; *Social Studies; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Asia (Central); ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest discusses: (1) reasons for learning about Inner Asia; (2) how to include Inner Asia in the curriculum; and (3) strategies for teaching about Inner Asia. U.S. students have difficulties in interpreting current events that occur in this region, because they lack knowledge of the history, geography, and cultures of Inner Asia. This digest provides a brief description of Inner Asia's characteristics and considers methods of integrating the study of Inner Asia into elementary and secondary school social studies curriculums. Selected teaching strategies include the use of: (1) newspapers; (2) various Asian cultures' comparisons; (3) arts, crafts, music, and literature sources; (4) map exercises; (5) biographical studies of Inner Asian heroes; and (6) classroom instruction on the effects of various political systems, such as communism, socialism, or nationalism, on the peoples of Inner Asia. Fourteen references and ERIC resources are included. (JHP)

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by

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ERIC Digest EDO-SO-89-3

April 1989

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ERIC Digest EDO-SO-89-3 April 1989

Teaching About Inner Asia

by David Weston

Recent reports on elementary and secondary schools reveal that American students tend to be grossly ignorant of the history, geography, and cultures of peoples around the world. These deficiencies in knowledge are linked to inadequacies in the curriculum. "In educating students, the languages, cultures, values, traditions, and even the location of other nations are often ignored," says the National Governors' Association Task Force on International Education (1989, 1). This general criticism of international education in schools is especially applicable to teaching and learning about that great Eurasian land mass known as Inner Asia. This ERIC Digest discusses (1) reasons for learning about Inner Asia, (2) how to include Inner Asia in the curriculum, and (3) strategies for teaching about Inner Asia.

Why Should Students Learn About Inner Asia? Today, more than ever before, students in the United States are exposed to information and ideas from the heart of the Eurasian land mass. News from Soviet Central Asia tells of riots, earthquakes, and civil rights violations. Reports from Afghanistan inform us of invasions, political intrigue, and ethnic group conflict. Stories from Tibet reveal that untold numbers of people are resisting rule by an alien Chinese government. American students are likely to have no context in which to interpret these events, because they lack knowledge of the history, geography, and cultures of Inner Asia.

One of the most significant characteristics of Inner Asia is its central location in relation to the major sedentary civilizations of the past and present. To the southeast is the enormous realm and time-honored civilization of China. Due south are the varied peoples and cultures of the Indian subcontinent. To the northwest are Russia and the other nations of Europe, extending from the Ural mountains to the Atlantic ocean. Finally, to the southwest is the region that Europeans refer to as the Middle East.

Within the Eurasian heartland of Inner Asia dwell a rich variety of peoples, including Mongols and Tibetans, Kazakhs and Kirghiz, Uzbeks and Uighurs, Turkmen and Tadjiks, Afghans and Pathans, and many more. Until modern times, most of these people were nomads; but some of them established great cities and empires, and nearly all had deep and lasting effects on world history.

The location of Inner Asia, in the middle of the Eurasian land mass, has in the past made this area a convenient crossroads for traders and travelers as well as a bloody battlefield for frequent wars between the nomads of the central heartland and the settled peoples who lived around them. The intermittent warfare and rich cultural exchanges continued until modern times.

The "great silk road" on which Marco Polo traveled was an Inner Asian highway established and protected by Mongol warriors. The introduction of papermaking to peoples of the West came from China through the paper industries of Samarkand and Bukhara in Inner Asia. The conquests of Inner Asian warriors and their legendary leaders, such as Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, and Babur, have shaped and reshaped nations and empires from China to Russia and Eastern Europe and from India to the so-called Middle East.

Most secondary students in the United States have little knowledge of the peoples and places of Inner Asia, of this region's geography and history, of its significance in world history and current events. Overcoming this ignorance is imperative for students who will be living in the emerging global community of the twenty-first century.

How Can Inner Asian Studies Be Included in the Curricula of Elementary and Secondary Schools? Lessons about Inner Asia can be infused into sixth- and seventh-grade courses in cultural area studies or world geography and history. In addition the scope of high school courses in world history and geography can be expanded to include more extensive treatments of various non-Western peoples, including those of the Eurasian heartland. What are some of the topics and themes that might be emphasized in studies of the geography, history, and cultures of Inner Asia?

The study of Inner Asian geography can provide a spatial frame of reference which allows students to understand this part of the world in relationship to other parts. Some of the world's most fascinating geographic features can be found in Inner Asia: towering mountains (e.g., Pamirs and the Tien-shan), rushing rivers, (e.g., the Syr-Darya and Amu-Darya), and treacherous deserts (e.g., the Kyzyl-Kum and the Kara-Kum). Emphasis on the geographic theme of human-environment interactions can help learners understand how the cultures of different peoples may shape and be shaped by their surroundings. Attention to the geographic themes of place and location in Inner Asia can generally enhance the geographic literacy of students.

Another way to integrate the study of Inner Asia into the social studies curriculum is through in-depth investigations of one or two of the many cultures of this region. For example, an inquiry into the dwellings, food, clothing, folklore, and music, etc. of the Uzbeks or the Uighurs can open many avenues of understanding.

The study of religion in the past and present is a means to link Inner Asia to other world regions in the social studies curriculum, because Inner Asia has served as a bastion (at one time or another) for nearly all the world's major religions. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity have been practiced, sometimes in combination with local religious traditions, by the various nations and groups of Inner Asia. Diffusion of religious ideas and practices

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from the surrounding civilizations into Inner Asia has occurred throughout world history. Furthermore, Inner Asia is a striking example of religious plurality and assimilation. In some communities, two or three religions coexist with strictly drawn lines of interactions between adherents.

Conflicts among Inner Asian peoples and between Inner Asian nations and surrounding civilizations have had a deep and abiding influence in world history and should be emphasized in the curriculum. The conquests of Genghis Khan and his successors, for example, established the great Mongolian empire that dramatically affected development of several nations of Eurasia, including China, Russia, India, Persia, Hungary, and Poland.

What Strategies Can Be Used to Teach About Inner Asia? Use newspaper articles to stimulate interest in Inner Asia and set the stage for detailed study. Students can be asked to explore the circumstances that led up to an event and to identify places, ethnic groups, and developments in history that have had an impact on the event. The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor* and other major metropolitan newspapers are excellent sources of articles that deal with Inner Asia. Various organizational newsletters also provide excellent information on current events.

A comparative study can be used to examine different aspects of Inner Asian cultures. Religious beliefs and practices, economic systems, and political systems, for example, are amenable to comparative study.

Arts, crafts, music, and literature are excellent sources of information about the culture of a people. Many good translations of very popular literary works are being done in English. A look at the crafts, such as carpets, pottery, and jewelry, is an interesting way to unlock the meaning of life among the Inner Asian peoples. Inner Asian designs and motifs tell volumes about traditions, superstitions, and legends. Excellent means of portrayals of these aspects of Inner Asian cultures are possible through slide presentations and documentary films. Pictures can often say more than hours of discussion.

Map exercises can be constructed to familiarize the student with the vastness and variety of Inner Asian terrain. Relationships of peoples to their environment can be studied with the aid of different types of maps.

Involve students in the compilation of biographical studies of popular Inner Asian heroes. These heroes helped shape the self-identities of the different ethnic groups, and much of the oral history comes from the development of these characters. Some interesting people to study are al-Kwarizmi, Genghis Khan, Marco Polo, Tamerlane, Babur, Ulug Beg, Al-Tabari, Kubilai Khan, Mir ali-shir Navoii and many others. Perhaps reading Inner Asian literature would ignite an interest in these people. A very popular novel throughout Asia is entitled *A Day Lasts More than A Hundred Years*, by Chinghiz Aitmotov.

It would be interesting to have students evaluate the effects of socialism or communism on most of the peoples of Inner Asia. What has 70 years of life under the Soviet system done to the Uzbeks, Turkmen, Kirghiz, Tajik, and Kazakhs of Central Asia? How have the Uighurs, Kazakhs, and Tibetans coped with domination by the Chinese Communist regime? What effect is *perestroika* having on the indigenous ethnic groups?

Nationalism among the Inner Asian peoples is a mounting issue today in the Soviet Union and China. There are signs of growing tensions between the ruling groups in the Soviet Union and China and the ethnic minority groups of these countries. A most interesting approach would be to discover how each ethnic group came under domination by the Chinese or the Russians and research the occurrences of overt resistence to domination by the peoples of Inner Asia.

Serious study of Inner Asia can greatly improve the quality of international education in schools. And there are many places in the standard social studies curriculum to infuse Inner Asian studies. Curriculum planners and teachers should take action to provide elementary and secondary students with opportunities to learn about this long-neglected and very important part of our world.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 1900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304; telephone numbers are 703-823-0500 and 800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (Current Index to Journals in Education), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract No. RI88062009. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.